

A publication of the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network

Veterans First

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A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

By periodically updating our medical centers, we are able to enhance the quality of our health care, your safety, and your access to care.

Facility Improvements Help Provide Quality Health Care

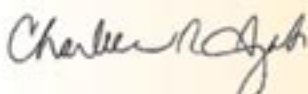
Dear Veterans,

As you visited your VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network medical center this past year, you may have noticed a building or improvement project taking place there. These projects are part of an ongoing effort to make the best use of our existing facilities. By periodically updating our medical centers, we are able to enhance the quality of our health care, your safety, and your access to care.

For example, at the Altoona and Erie VA Medical Centers (VAMCs), the patient intake and emergency areas were

renovated to update the facilities and provide easier access. On the Butler VAMC campus, renovations have allowed the expansion of the mental health and domiciliary programs to include compensated work therapy, a service that helps homeless veterans find meaningful employment. At the Wilkes-Barre VAMC, an underused courtyard was transformed into a beautiful therapeutic sensory garden for the enjoyment and benefit of nursing home and dementia patients. This garden is now being used for gardening, bird watching, fresh air, and sunlight.

These projects and others are part of the Network's overall plan for addressing the health care needs of the veterans we serve. As your needs change and as health care advances, we will continue to improve our facilities to meet those demands.



Charleen R. Szabo, FACHE
Network Director



Veteran Kenneth N. Christman enjoying the new sensory therapeutic garden at the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WILKES-BARRE VA MEDICAL CENTER

ON THE COVER

(main photo)

Veteran Desmond Wiley using the ScripTalk device to read his prescription label.

PHOTO COURTESY OF VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

(upper inset)

Returning service member Matthew Wilson receives assistance from case manager Connie Wilkins at the VA medical center in Altoona, Pa.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE JAMES E. VAN ZANDT VA MEDICAL CENTER

(lower inset)

A Personal Data Assistant (PDA) handheld device like this one being used at the Erie VA Medical Center is but one of many ways the Network seeks feedback from veterans.

PHOTO COURTESY OF VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Veterans First is a health care publication of the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network. The publication is intended to provide information to help you stay well, manage your health care, and learn about health services available through VA. It is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, which should be obtained from your doctor.

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Getting the Answers

VA Offers a Variety of Resources for Returning Veterans

As a veteran returning from Iraq, Afghanistan, or another area of deployment overseas, you may need assistance in understanding your VA benefits or in filing an application for those benefits. If so, where can you turn for help? The Department of Veterans Affairs offers several resources, but a good place to start is with the case manager for returning service members at your nearest VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network medical center.

"It can be hard for some returning service members to get through the system," says Connie Wilkins, R.N., case manager at the James E. Van Zandt Medical Center in Altoona. "I'm a resource for them — a person they can talk with one-on-one to help them sort through the information."

The case manager at each medical center is available to assist veterans in finding out about VA health care and other types of benefits, including disability, education and training, vocational rehabilitation and employment, and readjustment counseling through regional Vet Centers. The Altoona VAMC and other medical centers in the Network also hold outreach events for returning servicewomen and men where veterans have a "one-stop shop" to get their questions answered, pick up information, and get help with paperwork.

If a veteran returns home ill or injured, says Wilkins, the case manager is notified ahead of time and

begins to prepare for the patient's arrival, arranging the transfer of care from the military to the medical center, coordinating the changeover from active-duty

insurance benefits to veterans' insurance benefits, and generally easing the veteran's transition to civilian life.

VA medical centers, Vet Centers, the Veterans Benefits Administration, and the Department of Defense are working together to ensure that injured or ill active-duty personnel, reservists, and National Guard members receive care without delay regardless of enrollment, priority group, or financial status. Combat veterans

who served on active duty after November 11, 1998, are provided cost-free health care services and nursing home care for possible service-connected injuries or illnesses for a period of two years beginning on their date of separation from active military service. (Check with your case manager for all of the eligibility details.)

For additional resources to help you understand your health care benefits and settle back into civilian life, visit the Network's Web site at www.starsandstripes.med.va.gov. The site features a brochure about health care services for returning combat veterans and a list of the case managers at each VAMC. In addition, it offers a wealth of information for the newest generation of veterans and their families, including links to other federal agencies and organizations that offer related benefits and services.



Connie Wilkins assisting returning service member Matthew Wilson at the VA medical center in Altoona, Pa.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE JAMES E. VAN ZANDT VA MEDICAL CENTER

One Marine's Experience

For Todd Herman, a Marine Corps veteran from Coalport, Pa., memories of his return from the Fallujah area of Iraq are vague. He had suffered facial injuries that required surgery at Bethesda Naval Hospital before he could travel back to his home near Altoona.

Connie Wilkins, case manager for returning service members at the James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center, says she coordinated Herman's return from Bethesda and arranged for his follow-up medical care at the Altoona VAMC. "I worked with the point of contact at Bethesda

so that Todd's medical care was not interrupted when he returned to Pennsylvania." Wilkins also coordinated his insurance benefits and made sure that he had the information he needed to contact the regional Veterans Benefit Administration office in Pittsburgh.

"They were more than helpful," says Herman, who recalls that his return went smoothly.

"We spoke with Todd's family to be sure they knew we were here for them if they needed us," says Wilkins. "If there is anything that we can do to make sure his care goes smoothly, we'll do it."

TELEMEDICINE:

Bringing VA Health Care Closer to the Veteran

Advancements in technology have brought many positive changes to health care. One of these advancements is *telemedicine*, which is now being used by VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network facilities to make health care more easily available to veterans.

Telemedicine is simply “using electronics and technology to provide health care,” according to Tom Patts, telemedicine and telehealth coordinator for the VA medical center in Wilkes-Barre. Here’s how it works: A health care provider at one facility and a patient at another talk with each other face-to-face using video equipment. “It’s live, not taped,” says Patts, “and it’s designed to be confidential and secure.”

An example is the telesleep clinic at the Erie VA Medical Center (VAMC). Erie patients with sleep disorders have an initial appointment with a health care provider at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System. Follow-up visits are done at the Erie VAMC using telemedicine. Jean Spires, RN and team leader for specialty clinics at the Erie VAMC,

“Telemedicine is a wonderful tool. Patients like it because of the easy access.”

says that in addition to the sleep disorders clinic, telemedicine also plays a large part in Erie’s behavioral health program. “Telemedicine is a wonderful tool,” she says. “Patients like it because of the easy access.”

In addition to being used between medical centers, telemedicine is also a tool for medical centers and their community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs). In the area served by the Wilkes-Barre VAMC, for instance, some patients live as far as a three-hour-drive away



Dietitian Paola Montross at the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center consults with patient Dale Pharo and his family at the Allentown, Pa. Outpatient Clinic.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WILKES-BARRE VA MEDICAL CENTER

from the medical center, but only a few miles from a CBOC. To save patients the time, distance, and stress of excess travel, telemedicine is used between the CBOCs and the medical center in Wilkes-Barre, and even between the CBOCs themselves.

There are several benefits to telemedicine. Veterans are able to reduce the distance they drive to appointments, saving time and, during the winter months, avoiding risky travel. It also allows health care providers to see more patients, reducing the time that a veteran must wait to schedule an appointment. According to Patts, telemedicine is also reducing the number of “no shows” — appointments missed by veterans, sometimes because of travel difficulties.

While it has mainly been used in specialty clinics, telemedicine has also taken place in some other areas, such as occupational therapy, nutrition, and pharmacy education.

To learn more about the availability of telemedicine, talk to your VA primary care provider.

What Will They Think of Next?

"Talking" Prescription Label Helps Visually Impaired Veterans

A new tool is available for visually impaired veterans in the Network. ScripTalk, a "talking" prescription labeling system, helps veterans who have difficulty seeing the information on their medications.

According to John Ciak, coordinator of the Visual Impairment Services Team (VIST) for the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, there are two parts to the ScripTalk system. The first is a label containing a computer microchip that stores the medication information. The second part is a reader device. As the veteran passes the prescription container's label over the device, it translates what's on the label into a computerized "voice" that gives the veteran the information.

"The system is simple to use," says Ciak, "and has been well received by both patients and medical center staff."

The ScripTalk system is a beneficial tool for visually impaired veterans for two reasons: patient safety and independence. "The talking label, which identifies the medication and gives the dosage information, ensures that the patient is taking the medication according to

directions," says Ciak. "It also gives the patient the ability to take the medication without being dependent on another person to read the instructions."

The ScripTalk labeling system will be available at all VA medical centers by October, says Ciak. He notes that prescriptions with the special labels are filled at the medical center pharmacies, not through VA's outpatient pharmacy mail-order program.

Veterans must meet certain requirements to be eligible to have the ScripTalk labeling system. Ciak recommends that those who are interested consult with their primary care provider or the VIST coordinator at the nearest VA medical center for more details.

Veteran Desmond Wiley discusses the ScripTalk device with Visual Impairment Services Team (VIST) coordinator John Ciak.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Patient Feedback: What You Say Makes a Difference!

Focus groups, quick cards, telephone surveys, suggestion boxes ... these are a few of the ways the medical centers and community-based outpatient clinics around the Network find out about your health care experiences with them.

Why do we want to know? "Patient feedback is vital to our success in providing veterans the care they need," says Karen Rynkowski, patient advocate coordinator for the Network.

According to Rynkowski, VA facilities use a variety of methods to collect feedback in order to reach patients receiving different types of health care services. For instance, a *quick card* is a short, 10-question survey that asks veterans about the care they received during their visit to the medical center or clinic. Quick cards may be distributed in waiting areas or given to patients in their rooms. *Focus groups*, on the other hand, give veterans the opportunity to discuss their care in a group setting.

Rynkowski says that two other feedback tools are routinely used within the Network: *Suggestion boxes*



Volunteer Fran Hatheway surveys veteran Gary Schul and his wife, Linda, with the help of a Personal Data Assistant (PDA) handheld device—one of many ways the Network seeks feedback from veterans.

are available at all facilities, and veterans are encouraged to drop in their comments. *Mystery shopping*, which involves employees from one facility visiting or calling another facility anonymously, is used to survey such things as directional signs, security, and employee courtesy.

As the comments and concerns of veterans are gathered and recorded, the information is passed on to the medical center leadership and/or customer service committee. After review, steps are taken to

address any changes or improvements that might need to be made.

Rynkowski reminds veterans that, in addition to the ways of collecting your feedback mentioned above, each medical center has a patient advocate whose job includes listening to, tracking, and helping resolve patient concerns. "Veterans should know that their feedback is important and meaningful," says Rynkowski. "We're always looking for ways to improve our delivery of care and customer service."

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ERIE VA MEDICAL CENTER

Caring For A Loved One with Alzheimer's Disease

It may be the most loving, yet most difficult task one family member can undertake for another — caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease.

The most common form of dementia, Alzheimer's disease is a progressive brain disorder that seriously affects a person's ability to carry out the activities of daily living. VA estimates as many as 600,000 veterans are dealing with the disease, which has no known cure.

Previously thought to be a normal part of aging, such things as changes in personality, mood swings, loss of recent memory, and problems with proper judgment could actually be early signs of Alzheimer's. Therefore, says Glenn Snider, M.D., geriatrician and chief of staff at the Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center (VAMC) in Clarksburg, W. Va., it is important for family members not to brush off these types of changes in their loved one's behavior, but to share them with the veteran's primary care provider.

Beverly Delaney, RN, acting associate director for patient care services at the Clarksburg VAMC, says there are two things that the caregiver(s) of an Alzheimer's patient should do as early on as possible. "First, they should learn all they can about the disease," she says. At the Clarksburg VAMC, a team comprised of the veteran's primary care provider, nurse, and social worker offers education and support to the patient and caregiver(s). Second, says Delaney, the family and patient should work with the social worker to make decisions about financial matters and end-of-life care so that the veteran's wishes are documented while he or she is still competent and able to communicate them.

There are many things that caregivers can do to

help a loved one in the early stages of the disease. For example, says Delaney, keep things simple. Don't move furniture around, keep a daily routine, and reduce distractions by turning off the radio or television when talking.

Paying attention to potential hazards around the home is also very important. Install grab bars and non-skid mats in bathrooms. Lock up cleaning supplies and medicines. Set hot water heaters no higher than 120° Fahrenheit to avoid burns.

As the disease progresses, usually over the course of eight to 10 years, caring for an Alzheimer's patient becomes increasingly difficult. For times when the caregiver needs a break or must be away, respite care — services provided to the veteran by other caregivers for a short period of time — is offered through VA medical centers. In addition, some veterans may be eligible for financial assistance through VA to pay for non-medical services, such as meal preparation, bathing, and shopping.

When the disease is in its more advanced stages, caring for the Alzheimer's

patient at home could extend beyond the abilities of the caregivers. "The family should recognize that Alzheimer's patients develop behavior problems that they are unable to control because the behavior is part of the disease," says Dr. Snider. "The family and health care team should discuss the point when the patient should be placed in a care unit."

To learn more about Alzheimer's disease and VA resources for Alzheimer's patients, talk with your loved one's primary care provider. You can also visit www.alzheimers.org.



Clarksburg VAMC Chief of Police William "Allen" Collins and his father, Paul, who has Alzheimer's disease

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LOUISA A. JOHNSON VA MEDICAL CENTER

Do you know a veteran who, after returning from the service, has continued to make an important contribution to the lives of others, his or her community, or our country (e.g., in the fields of science, medicine, the arts, etc.)? If so, please write and tell us about this Vital Veteran. Please include a paragraph telling us why you are nominating this

veteran. Include specific instances of what he or she is doing to better the lives of others. Be sure to include your address and telephone number in case we need to reach you.

Mail to:
"Vital Veteran"
VA Stars & Stripes
Healthcare Network
Delafield Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15240

Veterans Update

NEWS YOU CAN USE

Wilkes-Barre VAMC to Restart Research Program

Wilkes-Barre VAMC is reestablishing its research activities. Research proposals may begin as early as October 2006. Since research has significantly contributed to health improvements for many people, veterans may be asked to volunteer for a research study. Plans are underway to have a "Research Kickoff Day" and provide additional information to veterans about participating in research studies at Wilkes-Barre.

Wilmington VAMC Expands Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Care

To meet the needs of older veterans and those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, the Wilmington VAMC is expanding its behavioral health program to include staff members that specialize in PTSD. The new staff, made possible by special Congressional funding, will be based in Wilmington and at the community-based outpatient clinics in Ventnor and Vineland, New Jersey.

Altoona VAMC Undergoes "Uplifting" Project

Altoona VAMC patient/visitor elevators now provide safer and faster service for veterans and visitors using the medical center. The elevator project took one elevator at a time out of service in order to install state-of-the-art controllers and other improvements. The project will now continue with replacement of the service and warehouse elevators.

SERVING YOU

VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network

Here's one good reason to get to know the facilities that make up the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network: **You are our top priority!** Dedicated to serving veterans living in Pennsylvania, Delaware, and areas of West Virginia, Ohio, New Jersey, and New York, the Network offers comprehensive services ranging from preventive screenings and checkups to long-term care. At our 10 medical centers and over 40 freestanding outpatient clinics, teams of skilled health care professionals - including specialists in substance abuse, prosthetics, and post-traumatic stress disorder - are committed to your health and well being.

Volunteer Opportunities Available at Butler VA Medical Center

The Butler VA Medical Center needs volunteers to assist in a variety of program areas. For example, volunteers are needed to support the community home care program and provide companionship to veterans in their homes. Anyone interested in volunteering may contact the Butler VAMC at (800) 362-8262, ext. 5044 for more information on volunteer opportunities at this facility.

Clarksburg VAMC Offers Care Coordination/Home Telehealth Program Services

The Care Coordination/Home Telehealth (CCHT) program places computerized equipment in the veteran's home to enable a nurse to monitor the patient's health. The goal is to manage medical situations to avoid a crisis and/or hospitalization. Veterans with congestive heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or hypertension may be eligible for CCHT. For more information, call Clarksburg VAMC's CCHT nurse, Paul Zickefoose (800-733-0512, ext. 3077).

No More Co-Payment for Outpatient Smoking Cessation Counseling

VA's co-payment for outpatient smoking cessation counseling (individual and group) has been eliminated. This will increase access to smoking cessation treatment for veterans. The elimination of the outpatient co-payment is retroactive to May 2, 2005. VA will reimburse all Priority 7 and 8 veterans who paid a co-payment for smoking cessation counseling that was provided on or after May 2.

VA Study Highlights Smart Ways to Lower High Cholesterol

A study by the department of Veterans Affairs concluded that high cholesterol is not only bad for the heart, but it may also increase your risk of Alzheimer's disease. To reduce your chances: keep your cholesterol level below 200; limit fat intake; eat dark grains, oats, and fruits and vegetables; and exercise three-to-five times a week. For more information, please visit the Veterans Health Administration's National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Web site at: www.vaprevention.com

For more details on these and other VA health care developments, please visit our Web site or call your nearest VA medical center. (See back cover for telephone numbers.)

The Latest Information for Veterans on Our Web Site

Any time you need it, you can find accurate and timely news and information for veterans by visiting the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network Web site.

Recent updates to the site include:

- information about each of our medical centers, including services provided, telephone numbers, and their community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs);
- a map showing all the medical centers and CBOCs, plus the 12 Vet Centers located within the Network;
- VA's "Combat Veteran Fact Sheet," which includes information on eligibility, services, and co-payments for returning combat veterans;
- a video of the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network's Top Accomplishments for 2004.

If you don't have access to the Internet at home or at the home of family or friends, check with your local library. Many libraries offer Internet access free-of-charge to the public.

VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network Medical Centers

ALTOONA - James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center

2907 Pleasant Valley Blvd • Altoona, PA 16602-4377
(814) 943-8164 or 1-877-626-2500 (toll free)

BUTLER VA Medical Center

325 New Castle Road • Butler, PA 16001
(724) 287-4781 or 1-800-362-8262
www.va.gov/butlerva

CLARKSBURG - Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center

One Medical Center Drive • Clarksburg, WV 26301
(304) 623-3461 or 1-800-733-0512

COATESVILLE VA Medical Center

1400 Black Horse Hill Rd • Coatesville, PA 19320-2096
(610) 384-7711 or 1-800-290-6172
www.coatesville.med.va.gov

ERIE VA Medical Center

135 East 38 Street • Erie, PA 16504
(814) 868-8661 or 1-800-274-8387

LEBANON VA Medical Center

1700 South Lincoln Ave. • Lebanon, PA 17042
(717) 272-6621 or 1-800-409-8771

PHILADELPHIA VA Medical Center

3900 Woodland Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19104
(215) 823-5800 or 1-800-949-1001

PITTSBURGH - VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

1-866-4VAPITT or 1-866-482-7488
University Drive Division
University Drive • Pittsburgh, PA 15240
Highland Drive Division
7180 Highland Drive • Pittsburgh, PA 15206
H. John Heinz, III Progressive Care Center
Delafield Road • Pittsburgh, PA 15240
www.va.gov/pittsburgh

WILKES-BARRE VA Medical Center

1111 East End Boulevard • Wilkes-Barre, PA 18711
(570) 824-3521 or 1-877-928-2621 (toll free)
www.va.gov/vamcwb

WILMINGTON VA Medical Center

1601 Kirkwood Highway • Wilmington, DE 19805
(302) 994-2511 or 1-800-461-8262

Joint Commission Announces Medical Center Accreditation Surveys

The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare

Organizations will conduct unannounced accreditation surveys of the medical centers in the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network during 2005. The purpose is to evaluate the medical centers' compliance with nationally established Joint Commission standards. The survey results will be used to determine whether accreditation should be awarded to each medical center and, if so, under which conditions.

Joint Commission standards deal with organizational quality-of-care issues and the safety of the environment in which care is provided. Anyone believing that he or she has pertinent and valid information about such matters may contact the Joint Commission. Mail, fax, or e-mail your comments to:



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